

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE WINE RUNS OUT¹

John 2: 1-11

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

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In the Atlanta airport I once stopped to see a display of Martin Luther King, Jr. memorabilia that belonged to the King Center. One thing that caught my attention was his pulpit robe that was behind glass. What struck me was that it was so small.

I

So after I returned to New England from that trip I asked a friend who knew Dr. King well, who had been a member of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery and had King as his pastor. He confirmed the fact that King himself was not a large man. Isn't it common that we assume people who become larger than life were also physically large people?

Our national recognition of Dr. King raises all kinds of private feelings and memories among those of us who lived through the sixties. Some of us here were spectators; some of us were active participants in the civil rights movement of those days. We all have our private memories. We were all to some extent shaped by those days.

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I was a teenager, growing up in the heart of Mississippi, the place that King himself called “a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression....” Unjust and oppressive political and social structures, separate rest rooms and water fountains, separate waiting rooms and separate seating in movie theaters, separate legal and educational systems and separate churches. Everything was separate; even in death there were separate cemeteries.

Other than the churches the two most developed organizations in our county were likely the Ku Klux Klan and the NAACP. The local Klan in my home county was considered one of the meanest, most violent in the entire south, but its membership was so secretive that I can't say that I knew any of them. Sam Bowers, the Imperial Wizard of the White Nights of the Ku Klux Klan, lived in my hometown, but I did not know him. Now we know that during my senior year in high school he ordered the murder of Vernon Dahmer, Sr., because he used his rural store as a place to register black folk to vote. Thirty-three years later, in 1998, Sam Bowers was finally tried and convicted of that crime and sentenced to life in prison. Bowers also played a role in ordering the killing of Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner and James Chaney in Philadelphia, MS, in 1964.

I can remember at least three bombings of black churches by the Klan, and each time our church took up collections to help them rebuild. The Klan even bombed the local newspaper office for writing an editorial denouncing the level of violence in the county. This is the homegrown terrorism that was part of the community in which I grew up.

In the black community the all-black Oak Park High School sponsored a youth choir which sang all over the county. One of the girls who sang in that choir was a promising young soprano named Leontyne Price, whose mother worked in the home of our neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Greene.

II

We also have our collective memories. There is the march across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma. There is the scene on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis on April 4, 1968 will never leave our collective consciousness. King's last words were to Ken Branch, the musician who was scheduled to perform at the service that evening. King said to him, "Ken, make sure you play 'Take My Hand, Precious Lord,' in the meeting tonight...." That was his favorite hymn. Those of us who are old enough can all recall where we were and what we were doing that day. We all knew that King's assassination would have as profound an impact on this country as his life.

Now it has been 42 years since that awful day. If he had lived, Dr. King himself would be 81 years old. The movement continued, of course, but no one could quite take King's place. He had that special gift that could bring together all kinds of people for the cause. There are plenty of people today who think that all Baptists are narrow-minded bigots; they need to be reminded that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a Baptist minister, and he was able to bring together Christians and Jews and Muslims and atheists under the banner of civil rights for all people. He stood up against domestic terrorism with a courage that inspires us to this day.

His dependence on Gandhi for his philosophical foundation for active non-violence is well known. But what is not as well known is his theological connection to Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of the Riverside Church in New York, who was a tremendous theological influence on King. Fosdick's wife, Florence Whitney, grew up in this church, and the Whitney Room here is named for her family.

III

How in the world can all of this be connected to the story of Jesus turning water into wine? Jesus came like new wine poured into the old wineskins. The wine in this story is significant because of its symbolism. The six stone jars holding the water for purification rites each held at least 20

gallons of water. Turning all that water into wine means that there was suddenly 120 gallons of wine! The symbolism becomes clear when we learn that there was a strong legendary Jewish tradition that claimed that when the Messiah comes, the earth would yield fruit so potent that one single grape would produce 120 gallons of wine! This was John's symbolic way of proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah!

And have you thought about the irony of the poor, feckless chief steward? Of all the people at the party, the chief steward is the one who should have known what was happening. He was, after all, in charge of all the food and all the arrangements. But the chief steward comes across as the least informed of the crowd! He can only shrug and remark to the bridegroom that the social protocol has been broken. The best wine has been served last. The expected order of things has been turned on its head!

So, too, the bridegroom is bewildered! The poor fellow accepts the compliment of the chief steward, but he doesn't know what the chief steward is talking about! And the community leaders who have gathered for the feast: they are just glad to have an abundance of good wine. The point is that all the leaders—the powerful people, the officials, the elected leaders, the movers and shakers—are ignorant of what has happened. They are merely the recipients of the abundance of good wine.

The only people who know what has happened are the lowly servants and Jesus. The leaders benefit from the wine, but they are totally ignorant of what has happened. If we want King's dream to be fulfilled...if we want King's passion to return to a movement that has in many ways gone stale...if we want to live in a nation where all of our children, as King dreamed, "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," then it will likely be the little people, the servants, who will serve the new wine. And the leaders will be bewildered.

IV

Church people are not always the movers and shakers of communities, but I propose that the churches of our nation break out the wineglasses and start serving the new wine of service to a world tired of waiting on its leaders. The new wine is still in abundance; there is enough to fill to the brim! Compassion is in good supply, and it can come from below as well as above. The level of giving for Haiti in this heartbreak that seems never to end is a testimony to the supply of compassion ready and willing to be turned into active service.

In these difficult days when catastrophe and heartbreak threaten to overwhelm Haiti, it is a great time for Christian churches to break out the new wine of service and serve it in abundance, to loosen timid tongues and give

courage to timid churches. I am talking about the wine of God's justice and mercy overflowing to people in all kinds of catastrophes. What less could we propose for a people who weekly pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven?

V

King's robe may have been small, but his wine was potent. That wine of compassion and service has not run out. Our storehouses are full. The world is thirsty for it. As we heard at the beginning of this service, "Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve.... You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

The wine jars of service are filled to the brim; draw it out, and take it to a world in need.